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Closing agency libraries deals serious blow

By Joel A. Mintz and Rebecca Bratspies
Posted December 11 2006

One of the hallmarks of the Bush administration's six-year effort to undercut environmental protection has been its contempt for the free flow of information. Early on, the White House rewrote the conclusions of EPA's scientists on global warming. Then it refused to disclose the list of companies whose leaders and lobbyists had participated in drafting its energy policy. And it has recently embarked on an effort to weaken the Toxic Release Inventory, the 20-year-old law that requires polluters to disclose publicly the extent of their pollution.

Most recently, the White House has opened a new front in its ongoing war on information with the announcement that it is closing the main library at the Environmental Protection Agency's Washington, D.C., headquarters. The library served both the public and the agency's own staff, making available the kind of detailed scientific information vital to the nitty-gritty work of environmental protection.

The closing of the Washington library, ostensibly for budgetary reasons, came hard on the heels of the closing of EPA's regional library in Chicago. It was followed by the shuttering of EPA regional libraries in Dallas and Kansas City and by reduced hours and public access in the agency's regional libraries in Boston, New York City, San Francisco and Seattle.

Vital technical documents are already being dispersed. According to published reports, some have actually been destroyed.

In announcing the closure of the libraries, the administration asserted that EPA staff and the public could access the information they require through EPA Web sites. That'd be fine if it were true. But the vast majority of the documents in the now- or soon-to-be-closed EPA libraries are not digitized, and no funding has been appropriated to do the job. So closing the libraries will render thousands of vital documents inaccessible.

EPA scientists, enforcement agents and technical experts need and depend upon the materials in the agency's libraries to do their jobs. Until they were closed, the EPA libraries fielded no fewer than 134,000 information requests per year from agency staff.

Among other things, EPA experts used the libraries to gather data needed to respond to emergencies (toxic chemical fires and spills, and chemical plant explosions, for example), to prepare for important enforcement negotiations with polluters, and to assist in tasks related to key technical aspects of national security.

With just those sorts of high-priority concerns in mind, representatives of more than 10,000 EPA scientists, engineers, environmental protection specialists and support staff signed a letter to the Senate Appropriations Committee vigorously objecting to the administration's proposal to close the libraries. Their plea fell on deaf ears.

The public has also put these libraries to good use as well. For example, community groups concerned about contamination in their water often use EPA libraries to understand who dumped what and when, sometimes as a precursor to suing polluters for the damage they have caused. The libraries' closure leaves a huge gap in publicly available information. The EPA apparently plans to charge for access in the future, when access is even possible.

Ironically, closing the libraries won't save that much money. The libraries were already very efficient, so as a percentage of EPA's overall budget the only fiscal "savings" that could conceivably result from the closures will be minuscule.

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The administration's decision to close the libraries deals a serious blow to the EPA and to its crucial mission of protecting human health and the environment.

It is also another in a long series of demonstrations of contempt for the public's right to know.

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